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White House may seek covert Contra funding

By Rita McWilliams
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The Reagan administration will ask for at least \$100 million in aid for the Nicaraguan resistance next year, and is considering asking for the funds as covert aid to avoid review by unfriendly congressional committees.

Sources said the administration hopes a request for covert aid would get a sympathetic hearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee, according to administration and congressional sources.

If the request were for overt aid, it would face a more contentious hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, a congressional source said.

In the Foreign Relations Committee, the aid request would come under the scrutiny of strong opponents, such as Sen. Christopher Dodd, the Connecticut Democrat who negotiated the release of Eugene Hasenfus, pardoned by the Marxist Sandinista regime in Nicaragua at the request of President Daniel Ortega.

Mr. Dodd will be chairman of the panel's Western Hemisphere subcommittee next year. He is expected to use his new post to strengthen his fight against Mr. Reagan's program of aid to the anti-Marxist rebels.

However, analysts noted that a request for covert aid would be a double-edged sword, since such a request would face difficulty on the House side, where the Intelligence Committee will be chaired by Rep. Louis Stokes, Ohio Democrat who voted against Contra aid last year.

Budget Director James Miller said yesterday on NBC's "Today" show that the Iran-Contra affair would make it more difficult to win approval of Contra aid.

Mr. Miller declined to specify how much aid would be sought by the administration, but said, "We're not going to abandon" the Contras.

Officials at the budget office and at the State Department said the aid proposal in the budget was "classified." State Department sources said "at least" \$100 million would be requested, but warned it is premature to put a dollar figure on the entire request for the rebels.

An Office of Management and Budget source said the budget request would most likely be covert and therefore go through the intelligence committees.

Congressional sources said there is also some anticipation that a supplemental budget request would be voted on later in the year, after the resistance has had more time to achieve military victories.

The resistance is not expected to

receive the final installments of this year's \$100 million until February. It is said to be gearing up for a summer offensive.

In a televised interview last week-end, Mr. Dodd said he warned Mr. Ortega he should not be too confident that the Iran-Contra scandal, in which funds from secret arms sales to Iran were diverted to the Contras, would kill further U.S. aid to the resistance.

Mr. Dodd, while taking the lead for liberal Democrats in the fight against Contra aid, has angered many Democrats who believe he sometimes goes too far — well beyond the party consensus.

While more than half the Democrats on Capitol Hill have voted to oppose Contra aid, many respected members — such as Sen. Bill Bradley of New Jersey and the new chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Sen. Sam Nunn of Georgia, voted last year to support the Contras.

While emerging from Nicaragua with Mr. Hasenfus is considered to be a coup for Mr. Dodd, some believe the episode could backfire, especially when a spokeswoman for the Nicaraguan Embassy in Washington, Sofia Clark, said Mr. Hasenfus' pardon — and his expected testimony before Congress — "serves a better purpose than letting him sit in a Nicaraguan jail."

Ben Wattenberg, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, said of Mr. Dodd, "He's a very bright and capable legislator but he's got to guard against the appearance — and I stress the appearance — of depicting the United States as the perpetrator of wrongdoing in the world rather than the opponent of wrongdoing."

One Republican Senate source who worked to push last year's Contra package, said, "Dodd must realize that this could tar him with the brush of being too close to Ortega. He took a risk in doing it."

Funding could more easily move through the Senate Intelligence

Committee, sources said, because it would be chaired by Sen. David L. Boren, an Oklahoma Democrat who voted for President Reagan's \$100 million aid package last year.

Ann F. Lewis, national director for Americans for Democratic Action, the liberal congressional rating group that gave Mr. Dodd a 100 percent rating in 1985, said Democrats will be asking the administration, "What have we gotten for our money so far?"

She said key questions will be why the Contras spend so little time in Nicaragua and why they haven't been able to gain political support within Nicaragua's borders.